

'The Backyard': Masochism Begins at Home

By [Michael O'Sullivan](#)

October 31, 2003

ABOUT 45 minutes into "The Backyard" -- a graphic documentary about the disconcerting phenomenon known as backyard wrestling, in which children, teenagers and a few young adults who should know better stage bloody amateur fights involving broken glass, barbed wire, thumbtacks, baseball bats, light bulbs and fire -- my flinch muscle started to cramp. By the end of it, I was sitting in my seat with worse posture than Gollum in "The Lord of the Rings."

"Cover your face!" shouts a spectator at one point during one of numerous matches captured by Paul Hough, a filmmaker who traveled across the country in search of devotees of the underground, Internet-fueled "sport." While I can't remember if this spontaneous bit of sideline coaching came as a result of a pane of glass being smashed over someone's head (or a fluorescent light bulb, or a metal trash can lid filled with burning lighter fluid), I took the suggestion quite literally.

You may want to as well.

Yes, it's hard to watch, but, like a train wreck, it's also hard not to. This must explain the small -- and, in some rare cases, large -- crowds from across our great nation and, in one instance, the United Kingdom, believe it or not, who gather to film each other appearing to beat the stuffing out of each other, and then to post edited versions of said beating on the Web. I say "appearing" because, like the professional wrestling on which it is based, it's fake.

Oh, the blood's real and red enough. Some participants even cut themselves surreptitiously with razors hidden in their clothing, a technique called "blading," simply in order to "juice" (or bleed) more "beautifully." And ambulance trips and emergency-room visits for broken noses and gashes are not unheard of, although Hough presents no evidence of anyone actually getting killed doing this. Still, like real pro wrestling, the fights are heavily scripted, with villains and heros using such monikers as the Retarded Butcher and the Lizard and with (relatively) careful choreography.

The big question in backyard wrestling, of course, is why anyone in his or her right mind (yes, girls do it too) would voluntarily risk pain and perhaps permanent injury for fun. Of course, football is dangerous too, as someone quite accurately points out.

Among the most articulate defenders of backyard wrestling are the parents of a young, hearing-impaired man who goes by the name of Scar. After their sickly son made it through a childhood of grave medical problems and surgery, Scar's parents (who, by the way, are about the only parents who would speak on camera)

explained that they felt it was more important for their child to have autonomy over his pain, deciding when and under what circumstances he would allow himself to feel it, than for them to dictate what he could or could not do.

Brothers Bo and Justin Gates, who were physically abused by their father as children, also argue that, for them, pain feels a little bit like love.

Not everyone is as self-aware as these folks, especially not the scary-looking backyard wrestling aficionado who compares the rush he gets from this leisure-time activity to gay bashing.

The movie is not for the squeamish, but for those who are unafraid to look at what is, perhaps, their own metaphorical "backyard," for those willing to stare into the long, dark night of the contemporary American soul, its bone-crunching message is worth hearing.

THE BACKYARD (Unrated, 80 minutes) -- Contains real people doing really dangerous-looking things, and some bad language. At the AFI Silver Theatre.

Scar, a hearing-impaired backyard wrestling aficionado, in control of his pain.

 **0 Comments**

Michael O'Sullivan

Michael O'Sullivan has covered the arts for The Washington Post since 1993, contributing reviews and features on film, fine art, theater and other forms of entertainment to Style and Weekend. Follow 



Be the first to know.

Our award-winning journalists are there when the news breaks.

Try 1 month for \$10 \$1

Already a subscriber? **Sign in**